

AT THE CROSSROADS:

Readings of the Postcolonial and the Global in African Literature and Visual Art

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# ABYDOS PASSION PLAY: AFRICAN ORIGINS OF WORLD THEATER



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There has been heated debate as to whether drama did or did not exist in pre-colonial Africa. Eventually Africanists may develop a way of describing pre-colonial arts in Africa by reference to indigenous aesthetic terms. Until those terms are researched, agreed upon at a pan-African level and widely understood, we have to make do with the European terms. (Kerr 1)

The above statement captures the controversial climate of this paper, which seeks to demonstrate that not only did drama exist in pre-colonial Africa but that Africa indeed is the cradle of World Theater. I will illustrate this thesis by examining the *Abydos Passion Play* of the ancient Egyptians in juxtaposition with the ancient Greek theater and other theatrical traditions from around the world. The *Abydos* play was an annual event that centered on the death and resurrection of Osiris—the Egyptian god of fertility. Over the years, theater historians and critics such as Kenneth Macgowan and William Melnitz (1955), Margaret Bieber (1961), Gerald Else (1965), Theodore Gaster (1975), Phyllis Hartnoll (1998), Margot Berthold (1999), and Oscar Brockett with Franklin Hildy (2002) have all drawn attention directly or indirectly to the *Abydos* play, which was performed between 2500 and 550 BC. In



particular, Berthold provides some useful information on the structure of the performance, and I will rely on her for the precise details:

The god Wepwawet, in the form of a Jackal, opened the ceremonies. Immediately after the figure of Wepwawet, there appeared the god Osiris, in his full majesty, and after him, his ennead—the nine gods of his entourage. Wepwawet was in front, clearing the way for him. In triumph Osiris travels along in his ship, the Neshmet bark, escorted by the participants in the mystery ceremonies. They are his comrades-in-arms in his fight against his enemy Seth. After this prelude, there followed the great departure of the god, ending with his death. The death scene probably did not take place in full view of the general public, like the crucifixion of Golgotha, but in secret. But all the louder did the participants join in the lamentations of Osiris's wife Isis. In the next scene the god Thoth comes by ship to fetch the corpse. Then, preparations for the burial are made. The dead Osiris is buried at Peker, a little over a mile from the Osiris temple, against the background of the wide, crescent-shaped plain of Abydos. In a great battle the enemies of Osiris are slain by his son Horus, who now has grown into a young man. Osiris, risen to a new existence in the realm of death, reenters the temple as ruler of the dead. (15, 18)

Why is the above not a valid theatrical experience? And why would theater scholars routinely bypass Egypt and emphasize ancient Greece as the origin of a bona fide and authentic drama? In an attempt to find a clear and convincing answer to these questions, scholars have come up with divergent opinions. Observing that "there were, of course, other cults in which events from the life of the gods were represented in mimic scenes, as in Egypt, Eleusis, and Delphi," Bieber laments the "lack of development to a living literary form" (1). Further stating that the Dionysiac cult finally led to the "practice of representing someone other than oneself" (1), she expresses her admiration for the ancient Greeks for ensuring "the development of a religious idea into a national, literary, and artistic event" (17). Her verdict remains unequivocal when she observes that "the religion of Dionysus is the only one in antiquity in which dramatic plays could have developed" (1). Phyllis Hartnoll is equally critical of any attempt to suggest that theater began in Egypt. According to her,

It has been argued that the earliest extant Egyptian texts for funerals and coronations, some dating as far back as 3000BC, are real plays. But an order of service for coronation in which the king is crowned by the high priest is not a play script. The event is firmly rooted in reality. For theater as we understand it today three things are necessary: actors speaking or singing independently of the original unison chorus; an element of conflict conveyed in dialogue; an audience emotionally involved in the action but not taking part in it. Without these elements there may be religious or social ceremonies but not theater. (7)

Both Hartnoll and Bieber have been influenced by Western dramatic theory, which begins with Aristotle's *Poetics*. Of all the postulations on the art of drama articulated in this work, two (as evidenced in Bieber's and Hartnoll's argument) have been most influential: first, that drama is based on a *scripted* text, and second, that drama involves an imitation or representation of action. Although Aristotle has not explicitly recommended a written text, his extensive analysis of the art of the poet rather than of the actor appears to favor that idea and seems to be the basis on which scholars have repeatedly ascribed to him such a requirement. "Ever since Aristotle," writes Marvin Carlson, "Western writers have primarily considered theater as closely tied to the written text, essentially the physical enactment of such preexisting text" (1). While play scripts did exist in fifth century Greece, they were merely a method of recording speech between performances (45). It appears that, rather than serve as a pre-existing blueprint for dramatic action, the text was generated in the process of composition, just as today's stage manager would record a blocking after it has been rehearsed by the actors and approved by the director. It therefore follows that the texts were intended more as memory aids than as indication of the supremacy of the written word, and that they could still be altered in the process of composition—just as today's director can amend a published text in order to accomplish specific purposes.

In assessing the dramatic validity of the Abydos play or any other theatrical performance, the question inevitably arises as to who sets the rules. And who is the arbiter of taste? But this paper is much more interested in the *consistency* of any given criteria than the ethnic, cultural, or racial identity of whoever is applying the criteria. Certain contradictions have arisen in the ways scholars have applied the Aristotelian criteria in evaluating the *Abydos* play. Consider, for instance, that Italian

Renaissance drama *Commedia dell'arte* was not based on written text. *Commedia* actors worked from a plot outline that served as the basis for the improvisation of dialogue and action. A strict application of the requirement of written text would automatically disqualify the *Commedia*. But unlike the equally unscripted *Abydos* play, the *Commedia* generates no dispute concerning its dramatic validity.

Regarding the argument that the Egyptian actors played themselves rather than someone else, it is worth noting that the priests who participated in the performances impersonated the divinities and the ancestors. In the words of Ikhernofret who participated in the *Abydos* play between 1887 and 1849 BC, "I acted as 'his beloved son' for Osiris" (qtd. in Du Read 94, my emphasis). It is instructive to note the verb "acted." Berthold uses the same verb, when she observes in connection with the *Abydos* play, that "the priests organized the play and acted in it" (15, my emphasis). Since acting is simulating, and pretending to be someone else, the verb "acted" in the remarks of both Ikhernofret and Berthold indicates a representation rather than a presentation of action. But the pro-Aristotelian critics have remained adamant. Here is Else: "whatever analogues (none of them true ones for that matter) may appear in Egypt, Mexico or Polynesia, tragedy has never come to birth anywhere in the world except in Athens in the sixth century BC" (1). In fact, some of these critics have extended the argument beyond artistic borders. One such critic is Berthold. She has compared the philosophical thinking of the ancient Egyptians with that of the Greeks and finds nothing to admire on the part of the Egyptians. "For a flowering of the dramatic arts," contends Berthold, "would have required the development of a more freely responsible individual who would have a share in the life of the community, as encouraged in democratic Athens" (19). She has also pointed out that the citizens of ancient Greece "had a say in its rule, also had the possibility of a personal confrontation with the state, with history, with the gods" (19). She has further stated that "the Egyptian lacked the impulse to rebellion; he did not know the conflict between the will of the gods, from which arises the seed of drama" (19). Berthold concludes by pointing out that "in ancient Egypt . . . the beginnings of theater remained bound to the traditions of religious and courtly ceremonial. For more than three thousand years, Egypt's plastic arts flourished, but the full power of drama was never aroused" (19). She has introduced a more political than artistic argument. Perhaps the subject of this paper inevitably involves some politics.

If Berthold's views are right, another contradiction remains in that the ancient Greek theater was equally the theater of coercion and

domestication. The Athens ruler Peisistratus, who included dramatic presentations as part of the programs of the *City Dionysia* festival, was a widely acknowledged tyrant. And of course no play made it to the *City Dionysia* without the official approval of the political authorities. The ancient Greek theater was a theater of the status-quo. Aristotle's *Poetics* identifies the concept of "catharsis" which, through the use of pity and fear was to purge the audience of any tendency towards rebellion, revolt, or revolution. As to how this concept operates, the central character of a tragedy has one major flaw in his character, such as excessive pride, arrogance, or stubbornness. Audience members share this weakness with the protagonist and thus sympathize with him as this flaw threatens to ruin him. Eventually, the protagonist suffers misfortune as a result of his flaw. This compels the protagonist to appreciate his blunder and the consequent penalty. Society is therefore blameless while the protagonist is at fault. And members of the audience are compelled to purge themselves of this similar fault with the protagonist.

The theater of "catharsis" is therefore the theater of the ruling class. It validates the existing power structures and brooks no alternative social vision. This theater was used to justify an unfair Greek society that practiced slavery and treated women as second-class citizens. The ancient Greek theater was used to cow the masses into submission. An example of a play that clearly articulates the nature and essence of ancient Greek tragedy is Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*. So how perfectly democratic was Athens? And how flawlessly philosophical was the ancient Greek citizen? Regarding the latter question, I have been wondering whether Euripides's *Iphigenia at Aulis* provides some clue. In this play, Tyndareos makes all the suitors of his daughter Helen swear an oath and promise to defend the one who eventually wins her love. They are also made to promise that, should anyone ever abduct Helen, and keep her husband from her bed, they will all make war on his city and raze it to the ground. Helen eventually marries one of the suitors, Menelaos, but commits adultery by reciprocating the love of another (not one of the previous suitors), who carries her off to a distant land. In accordance with their promise, the rejected suitors join hands with Menelaos to wage war against the land of Troy, from where Helen's new lover comes. If the ancient Greeks could distinguish the will of man from that of the gods, why were the suitors so easily manipulated by Tyndareos, eventually fighting a war over a seemingly irresponsible woman? And why would Plato, in his *Republic*, be so afraid of the misleading potential of drama that he sought to banish poets from Greek society? A mentally liberated citizen should have a mind of his or her

own rather than being completely swayed by the characters and situations in a play. Clearly, therefore, Berthold's theory and argument about the substandard nature of the *Abydos* play, based on the lack of democratic credentials in ancient Egypt—as well as on the flawed mental capability of the ancient Egyptians—is of doubtful accuracy.

Oscar Brockett and Franklin Hildy have noted that “the Egyptians maintained an advanced civilization for three thousand years and never developed theatrically beyond ritualised performances, repeating the same ceremonies year after year for centuries” (9). Despite acknowledging that “the influence of Egypt on Greece apparently was considerable,” they have maintained that ancient Egypt “was a society that resisted changes that might have led to an autonomous theater, whereas the Greeks went on to a theater in which new plays were presented each year” (9). Like those of their co-travelers on the anti-Egyptian train, this argument is problematic. The *Commedia* troupes performed the same play for at least two hundred years. Each *Commedia* actor played the same character throughout his or her career.

Not every scholar is unwilling to grant dramatic recognition to the *Abydos* play. Macgowan and Melnitz have observed, partly in reference to this play, that “in Egypt, some form of *recognizable* drama goes back five thousand years, and perhaps even to 4000 BC” (17, my emphasis). And precisely with regard to the *Abydos* play, Macgowan and Melnitz concede that “here we have the first of those dramas that stretch on through the Mohammedan passion play of Husayn to Oberammegau” (18). They have further argued that the story of Osiris later transformed into the story of Dionysus. Through Gaster we can access some evidence of dialogue and stage directions suggesting that the *Abydos* play was properly dramatized:

THOTH (to HORUS)

Behold, I do convey thee that eye which in the future thou shalt never loose! (381)

(*Dancers are introduced*) (381)

HORUS (to THOTH)

Before thee now mine eye doth dance for joy! (381)

Although Gaster acknowledges that the play was performed in a ritualistic atmosphere, his analysis nevertheless conveys the impression that the performance was drama. He describes the play as “Egyptian Coronation Drama” (377).

The controversial nature of the subject of this paper has been aggravated by ambiguous methodology, unstable terminology, and inconsistent criteria. As Leslie Du Read has observed, “the resort to such terms as ritual drama, ceremonial drama, festival drama, and dance-drama reflect the inadequacy of Western categories in the face of different performance skills and expectations, while notions of the primitive and pre-theater defer to the dominant Western mode of theater and distort the particularities of indigenous traditions” (93). Du Read’s observation is informed by the theater of ancient Egypt. Using the *Abydos* play as an instance, Du Read has stated that “music and dance were integral elements, as was *dramatic play*” (93, my emphasis). The emphasized acknowledgement is of interest. It substantiates my belief that, whatever is the purpose of the various adjectives used by scholars to describe the *Abydos* play, what matters is that it is drama—just as a professor is first and foremost a professor despite the qualifying adjective of *assistant*, *associate*, or *adjunct*.

The year 534 BC is usually regarded as the beginning of legitimate drama in the history of World Theater. We are told that it was the year the religious festival of *City Dionysia*, held in honor of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine and fertility, was transformed into drama. The oldest extant account of this transit from ritual to theater and the version usually considered the most authentic comes from Aristotle. In his *Poetics* Aristotle explains that drama evolved out of improvisations by leaders of dithyrambs—that is, choral hymns sung in honor of Dionysus. Precisely how dithyramb metamorphosed into drama is still a bit hazy. But Thespis is usually credited with this innovation. We are told that dialogue was born in Greek theater when Thespis addressed the chorus with previously composed lines. The chorus, we are given to understand, spoke or sang back to Thespis. We do not know the specific wording of this speech, which Thespis is said to have delivered while impersonating Dionysus. It seems ironic that, while there are traces of evidence pertaining to the precise speech of the *Abydos* play, we do not have a shred of proof regarding the exact words spoken by Thespis, who is currently regarded as the world’s first actor. Ironically, too, virtually all the pro-Greek historians who attach great importance to script have acknowledged Thespis as a writer, even though there is no documentary evidence of his plays. It is believed that Thespis won both as a writer and an actor in 534 BC during the first dramatic contest of *City Dionysia*. Alois Nagler has boldly acknowledged Thespis as a “playwright” as well as an “actor, stage director and producer all in one” (3). It is instructive to note that, prior to Thespis’s appearance in *City Dionysia*, he had



been performing in Icaria—a district of Athens. It is believed that he performed his shows on a wagon. There is no evidence suggesting that these performances were scripted, but scholars believe they are drama. I find astonishingly provocative the statement that “if Thespis did not exist . . . it would be necessary to invent him” (Else 2).

Indeed, some of the pro-Greek scholars have made embarrassing statements in assessing the works of ancient Greek artists, including those with documentary evidence of their works, such as Aeschylus. For instance, Else has pointed out that, if the terms *drama* and *dramatic* “are meant . . . as signifying direct conflict, the open clash of opposing wills, it is easy to show that such a thing is still not to be found in Aeschylus’s earliest extant play; and indeed it is clear on the face of it that one-actor drama such as tragedy was from Thespis to Aeschylus, could not have been dramatic in this sense” (5). Conflict is probably the most important ingredient of drama, and it seems strangely inexplicable that the ancient Greek one-actor plays of Thespis and Aeschylus have been labeled drama despite the clear absence of confrontation between dramatic characters, the clash of contending wills. Surprisingly, Berthold, who has maintained that the *Abydos* play is not a genuine drama, has wholeheartedly admitted in connection with the same play that “there is *dramatic conflict*, and so the root of the theater” (14, my emphasis). Still in regards to Greek theater, Else has noted that “if finally dramatic is reduced to meaning no more than mimetic, that is the impersonation of a character other than one’s own, there is no objection to its being applied to pre-Aeschylan tragedy” (5). If any artistic event containing the mimetic impulse can be classified as drama, then how do we explain Bieber’s failure to grant dramatic recognition to the *Abydos* play after acknowledging that “events from the life of the gods were represented in *mimic* scenes as in Egypt” (1, my emphasis)? What do we make of this confusing and complicated scenario? And where do we go from here? What specific factor could be the greatest motivation for each of the scholars refusing to recognize the *Abydos* play as theater? Could it be aesthetic, social, moral, political, economic, or even racial? According to Brockett and Hildy, “the oldest humans and first rulers of Egypt may have been black—information which some recent scholars see as having been de-emphasized because of racial prejudice” (7).

I consider the race issue most interesting. It is highly likely that the whole of the confusing, complicated, and contradictory assessment of the *Abydos* play is a product of prejudice. Otherwise, these scholars could acknowledge that the *Abydos* play is a legitimate drama. And for non-Western scholars who have sided with Greece, I would recom-

mend a critical examination or re-examination of the *inconsistency* evident in the use of the Aristotelian criteria before disqualifying the *Abydos* play. If the performances of *Commedia dell' arte* can qualify as drama despite being repeated for many years without script, there is no reason the *Abydos* play cannot qualify as well. As already suggested, the mythological characters of the *Abydos* play were represented by the actors. Some of the anti-Egyptian historians, as we can see, have in fact attested to that. So the issue of the actors playing themselves rather than others is not an issue. It is unfair to tamper with the evidence when a non-Western theater is being evaluated.

Contrary to the advice in the epigraph that launched this discussion, Africanists should not bother with how best to describe pre-colonial performances, and it is unnecessary to agree on any terminology at a pan-African level. This is so because the *Abydos Passion Play* is a genuine drama even by Western criteria so long as there is a *consistent* and *indiscriminate* application of said criteria. That having been said, let me state also that the great Aristotle is worthy of commendation for authoring what is probably the most influential theoretical document of antiquity. But *The Poetics* should not be the final word regarding the origins of drama. The world was not devoid of valid dramatic experience prior to the emergence of Greek theater. F. B. O. Akporobaro argues convincingly that "literature need not be what is written only, but all verbal creations written or spoken which are artistically projected, the collection of oral compositions, recitations and performances of high artistic merit which are products of the creative use of the imagination by artists of the spoken word in pre-literate communities" (38-39). Interestingly, some Western scholars are beginning to impugn the continued deference to Aristotle. Listen closely to Ronald Vince: "what has sometimes not been sufficiently acknowledged is that Aristotle's philosophical speculations were culturally and historically defined not universally valid principles" (41). Vince is not alone. He has found a critical companion in David Wiles. "I do not believe that Greece was the cradle of my civilization," says Wiles, "because I inhabit an increasingly globalized culture. The idea that we should study Greek plays because that is how our theater began seems less and less compelling" (2). Theater is primarily a performative art, and simply privileging the written text over other elements of performance is to miss out on the other ingredients (speech, lighting, costume, song, dance, audience, set etc.) that make theater a collaborative enterprise. Strict adherence to the written text conveys the impression of theater as purely dramatic literature. Is it? The unwarranted emphasis on script also tends to give the impression that every written or published work

is good. That a work exists in writing or publication doesn't necessarily make it stellar. Numerous published works, including some titles by reputable authors, are far from satisfactory.

On whether theater can exist without a script, the late Polish director Jerzy Grotowski does not mince words:

In the evolution of the theatrical art the text is one of the last elements to be added. If we place some people on a stage with a scenario they themselves have put together and let them improvise their parts as in *commedia dell' arte* the performance will be equally good even if the words are not articulated but simply muttered. (32)

Despite not being scripted, the *Commedia dell' arte* was much more popular than its artistic compatriot, *Commedia erudite*, which was based on text and literary tradition, and was patronized by the educated elite. Similarly, in the Japanese medieval theater, *Noh*, which had attained a reasonable measure of popularity in the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries, "there are a number of plays of high standing that do not depend on any literary or artistic atmosphere" (Zeami 49-50).

Refusing to recognize the *Abydos Passion Play* as theater given the absence of formal script is tantamount to stating that a dead man has never existed because he has no birth certificate. This paper is not an attempt to defend Africa at all costs or, hide under the guise of a theatrical subject, to blame the West for every problem of Africa. My intention is to ensure that everyone is properly credited for work they have done. In that light, I will conclude by stating that the Greeks, much touted as the originators of authentic drama, invented only literary drama, the type that is associated with the written text, while the preceding Egyptian theater invented nonliterary drama and therefore can legitimately claim to be the origin of World Theater in whatever form and for whatever purpose.

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